DAWN

OPINION

Questions for Kabul

WHILE Pakistan has suffered the most from terrorist groups finding refuge in Afghanistan, and the Afghan Taliban have done practically nothing to stop these outfits from conducting cross-border attacks, the world is now waking up to the seriousness of the threat. At a meeting of the ISIL and Al Qaeda Sanctions Committee held recently at the UN Security Council, Denmark, in its position as the current chair of the committee, said that the banned TTP posed a "serious threat" to Central and South Asia, while pointing out that the terrorist group received "logistical and substantial support" from the Afghan authorities, namely the Taliban. The Danish representative also mentioned the frequent cross-border attacks that TTP terrorists have conducted against Pakistan, while alerting the international community to the threat that IS-K — also based in Afghanistan but opposed to its rulers — posed to the region. The Pakistani representative used the forum to criticise both the Taliban and their newfound ally, India, when he observed that terrorist groups, including the TTP and BLA, were thriving "under the patronage of their hosts", and were backed by "our principal adversary and net destabiliser in the region".

While the Taliban are often dismissive of Pakistan's concerns in this regard, it will be hard for them to brush aside the issues raised by the UN body. The sanctions committee has reaffirmed what Pakistan has been saying for long: that the Taliban are supporting the TTP, and that terrorist groups in Afghanistan can destabilise the entire region. The Afghan Taliban's responses to these grave concerns have been ambiguous, from stating that the TTP are Pakistan's problem, to claiming they are hosting Pakistani 'refugees', to saying that no TTP terrorist is based on their territory. As is evident, the international community is not buying the Taliban's explanations.

Instead of displaying obduracy over the matter, the Kabul regime needs to work constructively with Pakistan to address the problem. The last round of peace talks held in Istanbul earlier this month ended inconclusively, though the ceasefire between both states has held. Though it would be overly idealistic to expect the Taliban to take strong action against the TTP — both groups are from the same ideological stock, and have fought together in Afghanistan — Pakistan's demand that Kabul stop cross-border attacks is entirely doable. The alternative to the Taliban's dithering and denialism would be more conflict, which is not in the interest of either country. The Pakistani state, therefore, while taking a firm stand against cross-border terrorism and internal security, must not let bilateral and people-to-people ties nosedive further. If ties with Kabul sour even more, inimical actors in the region will be ready to exploit these differences, which will only add to Pakistan's security dilemmas.

Unsafe labour

THE cold, hard truth when it comes to Pakistan's industrial terrain is that for far too many workers, the workplace is a death trap. The recent tragedies in Faisalabad, where a gas explosion at a glue factory killed at least 20 people, and in Hyderabad where a deadly fireworks factory blast claimed at least 10 lives, are not one-off events. They form part of a pattern in which safety rules are ornamental, enforcement is lax, and accountability beyond the news cycle is rarely witnessed. In Faisalabad, a pre-dawn gas leak triggered an explosion so powerful that an entire cluster of factories collapsed and nearby homes were damaged. Rescuers spent hours pulling bodies from the rubble. Early confusion over whether a boiler had exploded points to a familiar chaos that follows such disasters. Regardless, the fact is that factories were operating in unsafe, congested conditions, and workers paid with their lives. Hyderabad's catastrophe is no less shocking. Fireworks were being manufactured illegally inside a house in Latifabad, with explosive materials hidden in a tunnel-like structure. The owner reportedly held a licence for another location. The blast was heard miles away. While some workers died instantly, several others were left with major burns.

As authorities piece together the remains and DNA tests identify bodies, the scale of negligence becomes clearer. The subsequent district-wide orders to seal illegal fireworks units and relocate LPG shops show that the authorities knew the risks long before the explosion. Sadly, action came only after lives were lost. Such negligence is tragically familiar. The Baldia factory fire in 2012, which killed more than 260 workers, should have transformed Pakistan's occupational safety regime. Instead, more than a decade later, factories still lack basic fire exits, inspections are sporadic at best, informal workshops operate inside residential neighbourhoods, and labour departments remain understaffed and politically sidelined. The government must do far more than order inquiries and issue compensation cheques. Pakistan needs a harmonised workplace safety law, mandatory third-party audits for high-risk industries, unannounced inspections backed by real penalties, and relocation of hazardous units outside populated areas. Safety must become non-negotiable. Until the state values workers' lives as much as industrial output, such tragedies will continue, and every charred building will bear witness to official neglect.

Privatising PIA

PRIME Minister Shehbaz Sharif's directive to expedite the privatisation of PIA, while emphasising transparency, is reassuring given that several past transactions have been plagued by opacity that virtually halted the process for years. The Supreme Court's intervention in the Pakistan Steel Mills' sale in 2006 became a landmark case when the court halted the process over reports of irregularities. The PSM has since been shut down but continues to incur losses in billions of rupees. Likewise, the buyers of a major bank had to face several politically motivated inquiries by anti-corruption agencies that failed to find any wrongdoing in the sale. Hence, a World Bank report has identified judicial activism, litigation, perceptions of corruption and weak political commitment as key factors that have undermined Pakistan's privatisation efforts post-2007. The bank has also recommended public offerings through stock exchange with transparent parliamentary oversight to avoid potential litigation on future transactions.

It is in this context that the PM's explicit call for complete transparency in the upcoming sale of the national carrier amounts to an admission of past failures. Whether this directive translates into a process transparent enough to withstand public scrutiny remains to be seen. Yet the focus on transparency does signal awareness that credibility of PIA's sale is essential for successful privatisation efforts. The assurances extended by the Privatisation Commission chairman that prospective buyers of PIA will not be offered any guarantees must help reinforce public trust in the transparency of the privatisation process. PIA's sale is positioned as Pakistan's first major privatisation in nearly two decades and remains a key structural benchmark under the IMF's $7bn bailout programme. The successful sale of 75pc of PIA's shares with management control in a transparent manner to one of the four prequalified bidders is crucial not only for meeting IMF programme requirements but also reviving the privatisation agenda and demonstrating the government's commitment to reforms.

BY AHMED BILAL MEHBOOB

Provincial autonomy

The top party leadership designs the system to keep CMs dependent on its directions.

PROVINCIAL autonomy has always been an ultra-sensitive subject in Pakistan. The country was split in 1971 primarily because we failed to manage the just expectations of the erstwhile eastern province of Pakistan. We experimented with various constitutional formulas to satisfy the aspirations of our former eastern wing, but the half-hearted implementation of the agreed constitutional arrangement in 1956 led to a weakening of trust between the federation and its eastern wing. The military coup of 1958 and the subsequent 1962 constitution given by one person, Field Marshal Ayub Khan, and its unitary contours further disappointed East Pakistan. Therefore, there is a need to be extra-sensitive when it comes to provincial rights and autonomy, not only in letter but, more importantly, in spirit of the constitutional arrangement.

Fortunately, the near-unanimous passage of the 1973 Constitution created a robust legal base for federalism in what remained of the country, consisting of the four provinces and the federally administered territories. The 18th Constitutional Amendment, passed with broad consensus 37 years later, further strengthened the federal constitutional framework. Over the subsequent 15 years, the provinces have emerged much stronger, more prosperous and even more assertive. Although we hear voices pleading for more autonomy or complaining about too much autonomy, the fact is that Pakistan has set a firm constitutional framework for federalism.

While after a long and painful journey, we may have been successful in settling most of our legal issues regarding federalism, the political forces are apparently not conducting politics in the true spirit of the constitutional provisions regarding provincial autonomy. In general, political parties continue to be the proverbial lengthened shadows of their top leaders and there is hardly any 'devolution' of powers from the central figure to the provinces. The overall organisation of most of the parties is weak, but as one goes down the hierarchy from federal to local, there is a steep decline in the powers and autonomy of sub-national organisations. Most of the decisions are taken at the central level, which the provincial set-up is supposed to implement without question. Even if provincial parliamentary boards exist, final decisions about candidate selection for provincial assemblies are taken by the central parliamentary boards which, in many cases, authorise the top party leader to take the decision.

According to the Constitution, the election of the chief minister is the prerogative of the members of the respective provincial assemblies. They do go through the motions of electing a leader of the House but the candidate of the majority party is almost invariably picked by the central party leader who in many cases, may not belong to the province.

Since the Constitution binds assembly members to vote according to party direction or face ouster from the assembly, members have no choice but to go along with the choice of the party leader, even if they have strong reservations about the candidate.

To understand the powerlessness of the MPAs, a case in point is the nomination of the little-known and least-qualified Usman Buzdar as a PTI candidate for the position of CM after the 2018 elections. The poor MPAs had absolutely no idea who they would be asked to vote for until party chairman Imran Khan dropped the bombshell just two days before the CM's election. The members had no role whatsoever in picking the nominee and were generally shocked at the choice but went along with it and elected Mr Buzdar as CM. It is now an open secret that the logic behind selecting a weak CM was that there would be no resistance to running the province from the federal capital through the prime minister's principal secretary. A similar scenario was seen in the case of KP after the 2024 election, when a rather weak and indecisive candidate for the CM's position was nominated so that the province could be run by the PM's secretariat.

It would be unfair to single out the PTI in this context. PM Nawaz Sharif's choice of Ghulam Haider Wyne as Punjab CM in 1990 followed the same pattern. Although Mr Wyne was a seasoned political worker, he was weak as a CM and followed the PM's directions in running the province without asking any questions.

The top party leadership designs the system to keep CMs dependent on its directions even in routine provincial matters. The former KP chief minister, Mr Ali Amin Gandapur, was asked by his party to seek the directions of the incarcerated party founder Mr Imran Khan before passing the province's annual budget for 2025-26. He faced extreme criticism when he had to get the budget passed without his leader's directions as the federal and Punjab governments denied him the opportunity to meet Mr Khan in prison. This must have been one of the reasons he was later removed from his position. The new CM delayed the formation of his provincial cabinet for 18 days and the provincial government remained nearly paralysed because he wanted to get Mr Khan's approval by meeting him in jail. But the prison authorities again did not let him meet his leader.

These are only a few instances; almost the entire political system, contrary to the spirit of the Constitution, is geared towards total obedience to the central party leadership in purely provincial matters, making a mockery of provincial autonomy.

Framers of the Constitution have done their job to ensure provincial autonomy; it is now for the political parties and their leadership to devolve their powers to the provincial organisations of the party and the CM, if the party happens to be in power in a province. Centralisation of powers is not only against the spirit of the Constitution, it also stunts the growth of the party organisation and provincial leadership, weakening democracy in general. ■

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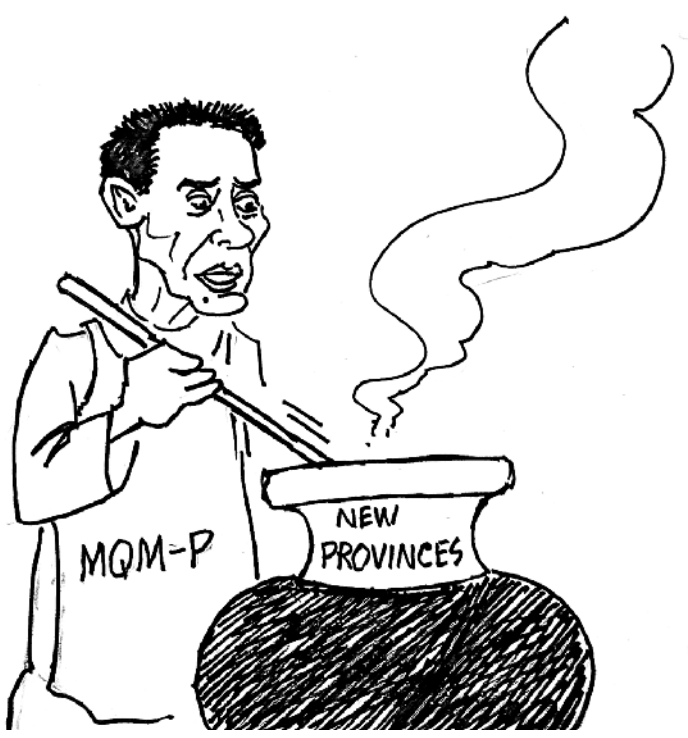

BY AQDAS AFZAL

Jungle Raj

PRIME Minister Narendra Modi's face was glowing as he approached the podium to address a charged crowd celebrating the BJP's stunning election victory in the state of Bihar. After thanking the people of Bihar, Modi immediately relapsed into the BJP's familiar narrative. Criticising the Indian National Congress, Modi pejoratively referred to it as 'Muslim League-Maoist Congress' — in part an allusion to the Congress's purported soft spot for Bihar's Muslims who constitute 18 per cent of the state's population.

The BJP's jubilation is not without cause. The party has emerged as the single largest party for the first time in Bihar by improving its tally to 89 seats compared to 74 in 2020. All in all, the National Democratic Alliance — the BJP and its allies — surged ahead with 202 seats in the 243-seat assembly.

It is important to understand the drivers behind this remarkable electoral victory in Bihar as the same formula is likely to be repeated in upcoming state elections. Before Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, the BJP's ally in the recent elections, took over two decades ago, Bihar, a state of some 135 million people, had rampant lawlessness or 'Jungle Raj'.

In the first decade, Kumar focused on providing public goods, mainly roads, bridges and access to electricity. But, failing to create jobs for India's poorest state, Kumar soon ran out of steam. Instead of turning towards pro-market policies that would generate competition, economic growth and jobs, without increasing the state's fiscal deficit, Kumar turned more statist in Bihar, where state spending was already at 34pc of GDP, double the national average.

Manipulation of macroeconomic policy tools to stimulate the economy and create employment ahead of elections to ensure re-election is known to economists. These tendencies were first captured by the 'political business cycle' literature that includes the Nobel laureate William Nordhaus amongst its pioneers.

India's rapid digitisation of government services, however, has exacerbated the phenomenon described by Nordhaus. In perhaps what can be described as digital political business cycles, some politicians can now use digital payment systems to engage in 'virtual vote buying' by directly reaching voters just before elections.

In recent years, cash transfer schemes directed specifically at women are increasingly being used by all political parties to win elections in India. Despite waxing eloquent against the use of such tactics — '*revdi* culture' — Modi's party used women-oriented financial support schemes ahead of polls in Maharashtra last year.

In the most recent elections, Kumar announced pre-election schemes amounting to 3pc of GDP despite Bihar's fiscal deficit at 6pc of GDP. Before polls opened, Kumar started sending INR 10,000 to one woman from each family, claiming that this was 'seed money' for small businesses such as beauty parlours, dairy units, tailoring and retail kiosks.

It goes without saying that with little oversight, and due to money's fungibility, the amount was probably consumed immediately. Economists warn that such populist policies can create serious fiscal implications, with Bihar being forced to rely on additional debt financing to sustain such expenditures.

> As in India, Pakistan's political parties are aware of the transformative political power of cash transfers.

According to Indian political analyst Neerja Chowdhury, these cash transfers underpinned the election results in Bihar. The 2025 Bihar election saw a record overall voter turnout of 66.91pc, the highest since 1951. This was driven by a landmark surge in female participation, where female turnout stood at 71.6pc — significantly outpacing male turnout (62.8pc) and marking a clear watershed from the 60.48pc and 59.69pc female turnouts of the previous two elections. In a sense, by directly doling out cash to voters, the BJP and its allies were able to encourage women to break from traditional loyalties of caste and identity.

To be sure, the BJP's rivals in Bihar had also promised goodies — one government job for every family — if they were voted into office. In this case, however, voters did not consider these to be credible commitments as government job promises appeared too good to be true.

It appears that, as in India, Pakistan's political parties are fully aware of the transformative political power of cash transfers. This is the reason why, despite being allies at the federal level, Pakistan's two main political parties were recently at loggerheads. After the recent floods, the PPP had asked the PML-N's government in Punjab to provide flood relief through the PPP's signature Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP). Despite repeated requests, the PML-N resisted their federal ally's demand with full force in the province, arguing that the amounts provided through the BISP were not enough to cover flood-related damage.

Meanwhile, BISP allocations have been rising steadily over the years. This year, the BISP allocation was increased by 20pc to Rs716 billion. The ability of cash transfers to tip the electoral scales in India, and Pakistani politicos' cognisance of this phenomenon, does not bode well for Pakistan's future fiscal management. Where providing unconditional cash transfers to poor citizens is commendable, political competition may lead to exponential increases in BISP allocations in the future, especially as we get close to the next elections.

Back in India, there were multiple fatalities in a bomb blast near the Red Fort in Delhi the night before the second round of elections in Bihar. Though it is too early to trace a connection, this tragic incident may have also impacted electoral outcomes, especially in the aftermath of the Pakistan-India conflict earlier this year.

In a bid to highlight his strongman image, Modi repeatedly alluded to the Pakistan-India conflict on the campaign trail. Under fire from opposition leader Rahul Gandhi for "lacking courage", the BJP even branded Gandhi the "poster boy of Pakistan". Surprisingly, where the usually bellicose Indian media seems to have simmered down, Pakistan keeps living rent-free in the BJP's imagination.

In all likelihood, Modi's victory in Bihar and the BJP's strong political momentum for the upcoming state elections are going to embolden foreign policy hawks in India. This is especially so since India was unable to achieve any of its military or political objectives in the recent conflict with Pakistan.

The BJP's surprising performance underscores its strategy for cementing power in different Indian states: direct cash transfers and a potent anti-Pakistan narrative. As the party seeks to maintain this momentum for upcoming state elections, Pakistani policymakers should be wary of runaway social spending, which could ultimately encroach on vital defence resources. ■

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